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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000019

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SUBJECT: REFORMISTS STRIKE DISSONANT CHORD

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian L. Burns, Director, Iran Regional
Presence Office, Dubai, UAE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(S/NF) Summary: Two recent conversations with active Iranian reformers yielded diametrically opposed views on what the US should do about Iran. An Iranian political activist and former MP recently told IRPOffs that US military intervention was the only way to guarantee positive change in Iran, explaining his views why the Iranian people would welcome such a step. He said the reform movement was dead and that elections would bring no substantive change. By contrast, a current reformist MP said that coordination between reformist groups on the Tehran municipal election list demonstrates that reformers can regroup and regain support when President Ahmadinejad's policies drive the country into the ground. He acknowledged, however, that change will come a millimeter at a time. With the ongoing violence in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, West Bank, and Gaza, he opposed aggressive action against Iran at this time, particularly in light of Iranian involvement in all those conflicts. On the other hand, he advised against dialogue with Iran at this time, given the current conviction among some officials that Iran has gained the upper hand. Both Iranians laid out their cases logically and without hyperbole. The call for military intervention and the advice against dialogue both represent minority views among our interlocutors. End summary

2.(S/NF) In recent, separate conversations, two Iranian pro-democracy intellectuals presented starkly different views of next steps on Iran. The first is a law professor, a former MP, and an outspoken activist who was arrested, reportedly tortured, and given a suspended sentence for insulting the Supreme Leader and propagandizing against the regime. He is appealing his sentence. The second interlocutor is a current reformist MP who is outspoken in the Majles with his criticism of government policy.

Reform movement - dead or alive?

3.(S/NF) During the Khatami presidency, the professor said, the

conversation used to be about reform, but people grew disappointed by the cowardice of Khatami and in the reform movement he led. The source claimed people have now given up hope on reform and think regime change is the only option. He was previously a supporter of a referendum for Iran but thought the time for that initiative had passed. In his view, evolutionary reform is possible in Iran, but it would take at least 10-20 years. If in the meantime, however, Iran acquires a nuclear bomb, the government will consolidate its power, ending the possibility of reform. He is convinced that Iran aims to build a nuclear bomb and says -- without claiming any insider information -- that he agrees more with Israeli than US estimates, putting the timeframe at six months to three years. In his view, the US should act within this short window.

4.(S/NF) In contrast, the MP said reformers were gaining ground in Iran, albeit one millimeter at a time. As proof, he cited the success of 18 reformist parties agreeing on a common list for the Tehran municipal elections, in contrast to the conservatives, who have multiple competing lists. He noted, however, the possibility of fraud distorting the results of the election. The MP thought the December 11 student demonstration against Ahmadinejad at Amir Kabir University was particularly significant, occurring during election week. He saw little significance, however, in the Assembly of Experts election. In the long-term, he thought that Ahmadinejad's policies were so ill-conceived they would eventually lead to the country to a dead-end, to the advantage of reformers. He said that while it was true the Iranian people were disappointed in Khatami, they now see that it can get a lot worse, noting that Khatami's presidency gave people a standard for comparison to conservative presidents.

5.(S/NF) The professor maintained that elections in Iran have no legitimacy or import. It makes no difference who wins the Assembly of Experts election or municipal elections; there will be no change. He dismissed talk of rivalry between arch-conservative Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi and the Supreme Leader or between Ahmadinejad and former presidential candidate, now mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf. He didn't dispute the rivalries but said one in office meant no qualitative difference

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over the other. When asked whether the goal of the IRGC was to support the clerical government or draw power from the clerics to themselves, again he saw little difference between the two groups. In fact, he said some non-clerics were worse than the clerics, such as Minister of Culture Saffar Harandi.

Regime change or change from within?

6.(S/NF) The professor maintained that the only option that the Iranian government fears and the only one that would likely be effective is outside military intervention. Iran, he said, has braced itself to endure any form of economic sanctions for at least a decade. Furthermore, Iran has allies, such as China, Japan, Russia, and Europe to help mitigate the impact of sanctions. In any case, he argued, sanctions are an ineffective diplomatic tool that take at least 10 years to be effective, if ever. In his view, the US has no option on Iran but military action. Unlike North Korea, Iran wants to be a regional and international power, and it would use its perceived invulnerability once armed with a nuclear bomb to assert its influence.

7.(S/NF) When asked if outside military intervention would provoke a nationalistic backlash, the professor said no. He said the Iranian government was so unrepresentative of Iranian culture that Iranians would not rally around it. Later in the conversation, he estimated that currently only 10 percent of the Iranian population support the government. He claimed to be well-placed to take the pulse of the population, through his law clients, his students, and his contact with the agricultural sector (he owns a farm). (Note: Many IRPO interlocutors have given similar estimates -- 10-15 percent -- for the percentage

of the Iranian population that supports the government.
Endnote.)

8.(S/NF) The professor also maintained that US aggressive action against Iran would not be viewed as neo-imperialism, noting that the only legitimate elections in the region have been held in Afghanistan and Iraq following US invasions. These elections, he said, belie the accusation of imperialism. At the same time, the professor maintained that the US push for democratization across the region is flawed as it will only allow greater public support for Islamists, citing the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The majority of Iranians are pro-American -- he said certainly 60 percent, perhaps as high as 70 percent -- largely because the government is against America, unlike in Saudi Arabia or Egypt where the reverse was true. (Note: An Amcits journalist recently in Iran told IRPOFF that in his view, Iranians are pro-Americans but not necessarily pro-US policy, comparing current Iranian public opinion to Saudi views six years ago. The professor mentioned that support for the Palestinians and the establishment of a Palestinian state was prevalent in Iran but noted the Iranians don't like paying for it. Endnote)

9.(S/NF) The professor was dismissive of the ability of expatriate Iranians to effectively spearhead change in Iran, although he indicated that coordination among expatriate groups was better than before. At one point he suggested a type of government in exile, along the lines of the Iraqi National Congress. He claimed his own intention was to continue to work for change from inside Iran.

10.(S/NF) By contrast, the reformist MP said that, despite his dislike for the government ("Ahmadinejad is crazy"), now is not the time for US aggression against Iran or a regime change policy. With the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, West Bank, and Gaza, a new conflict would be too dangerous, particularly in light of Iran's hand in all of these places. He argued that democracy should be allowed to evolve internally in Iran. He accused the government of trying to close off information to the Iranian people, in order to make them ignorant and impose "Islamic-Fascism," but predicted they would fail. For instance, he said the Majles was reducing press coverage of its deliberations. According to the MP's math, two-thirds of the population fall into the educated class -- implying they were immune from such efforts -- and one-third into the "poor" class. Of that "poor" class, some support the government for its religious ideology, some for its populist economic promises. When those promises don't pan out, that support would dissipate. He also claimed that only 10 percent of the population were hard-core supporters of the government.

Both agree US correct to depose Saddam Hussein

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11.(S/NF) Both the professor and the MP were supportive of US decisions to invade Iraq. The professor, however, thought the US had made mistakes in Iraq after the invasion, particularly disbanding the Iraqi army. In any case, he added, the situation in Iraq is very different from what the situation in Iran would be after an attack. He claimed the majority of the violence in Iraq is not directed at the US but is the result of an internal power struggle. Unlike in Afghanistan (or Iran), the aim of the Iraq invasion was not just regime change but also a power redistribution away from the minority Arab Sunnis, towards the majority Arab Shia and the minority Kurdish Sunnis, implying there was no issue of redivision of power in Iran. This shift away from minority rule is the root of the violence in Iraq, he said, and he criticized the US for not making this clearer in its public rhetoric.

12.(S/NF) The MP declared his happiness that Saddam was gone, having lost 12 members of his family in the war. He criticized the Iraq Study Group report, because he believed it implied that getting rid of Saddam had been a wrong decision. In fact, he lamented that the ISG's conclusions bolstered the Iranian

government's self-confidence for the central role it proscribed for Iran in regional matters. He believed the ongoing violence in Iraq was the unavoidable aftermath of ending a dictatorship. He also felt that Iran does not have the same kind of ethnic problems as Iraq. He opposed the notion of US dialogue with Iran at this time, when some Iranian officials feel they have gained an upper-hand in the region. Instead, the US should continue to put pressure on the government and to engage the Iranian people, making clear to them the US will not trade human rights to make a deal with the government.

13. (S/NF) Comment: Both interlocutors are serious political actors from the reformist camp, with the difference that the former MP broke with the system (although he is still allowed to teach and practice law), and the current MP continues to walk a fine line, although he doubts he will be allowed to run again. On the subject of US military intervention, we occasionally meet Iranians living inside Iran who support it. An ongoing contact, a Tehran businessman, recently repeated the same plea to IRPO director. An Iranian-American who recently traveled to Iran said a friend of his, a businessman with large government construction contracts, had told him a US invasion was the only path to change in Iran. This sub-source predicted 20,000 US soldiers would die in the conflict, but "there was no other choice." The professor, however, did not offer a clear description of what he envisions happening post-conflict. Separately, the MP did not substantially engage on the nuclear issue or its impact on evolutionary trends. He appears to be counting on Ahmadinejad's flawed policies to lead to the downfall of conservatives. Overall, the majority of our interlocutors warn against foreign intervention, saying it would drive Iranians closer to their government, allowing it to further consolidate its power. The majority of our interlocutors also see merit in dialogue between the two countries, but there is a prevalent nervousness that we will "sell out" democracy activists to get a deal on the nuclear issue and regional conflicts. There also remains the sense that no group wants another to get the credit for breaking the thaw between the US and Iran.

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